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Learning About Race and Ethnic Diversity on Campus: Employee Perceptions from an Urban University

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Keywords: Diversity, postsecondary, race and ethnicity, organizational learning.

Abstract: The research project utilized a mixed method design to investigate the extent to which a large (i.e., 26,000 students) urban university has provided an accepting and accommodating environment for individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; and to identify the race and ethnic diversity-related issues and concerns that currently exist among university employees.

Introduction

Over the last decade, many colleges and universities have initiated a variety of approaches to assist their organizations to become multicultural, e.g., forming a diversity council; adding new courses; hiring racially/ethnically diverse staff; providing racial-reconciliation and diversity-related workshops for administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders. College campuses have thereby experienced tremendous growth in faculty, staff, and students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. For example, the number of full-time faculty members of color increased by 47.7 percent from 1985 to 1995, compared to a gain of 9.9 percent among whites (ACE net, 2000). Still, faculty of color represented only 12.9 percent of full-time faculty in 1995 (ACE net, 2000). Similarly, from the late 1980s to 1996, the number of African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and American Indian students enrolled in college increased by 2.7 percent to an all-time high of nearly 3.6 million (Ace net, 2000).

Increased numbers of people of color on campuses notwithstanding, employment in a racially and ethnically diverse workplace is often a unique experience for both European Americans and People of Color. Individuals from these populations tend to grow up in racially, ethnically, and socio-economically segregated urban communities and attend equally segregated elementary and secondary schools. This pre-employment race/ethnic isolation increases the likelihood of race/ethnic diversity related issues and problems in employment settings. Such problems and issues can significantly influence the organizational climate of universities as they attempt to attract and retain greater numbers of people of color among their faculties and staff. As racially and ethnically diverse individuals and groups interact in the workplace, their culturally-informed differences tend to produce problems and issues that must be effectively managed by the organization. However, these types of issues and problems tend to be “double-loop” learning problems that contribute to defensive routines in organizations (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1987). They are thereby very difficult to detect and resolve.

Observing that the goal of becoming a premier urban university requires the development of a talented workforce that reflects the diversity of the urban community, the President (Chancellor) of a major Midwestern urban university established a task force on race and ethnicity. Over 60 faculty, academic staff, classified staff, and students were either nominated or volunteered to serve on the Task Force. From these volunteers, an 18-member Task Force Leadership Team was appointed by the President (Chancellor). The larger group of remaining volunteers served as Consultants.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the research conducted by the Task Force was to investigate the extent to which a large (i.e., 26,000 students) urban university located in the Midwest U.S.A. has provided an accepting and accommodating environment for individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; and to identify the race and ethnic diversity-related issues and concerns that currently exist among faculty, academic staff, and classified staff. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What types of racial and ethnic issues and concerns exist among the university's faculty and staff? To what extent do members of the campus community perceive that their race and ethnicity related issues and concerns were successfully resolved?
2. To what extent do the university's employees differ by race/ethnicity in their perceptions of diversity in race and ethnicity on campus regarding five organizational climate constructs: organizational outcome, personal consequences, emotional reactions, judgments, and behavioral reaction?
3. To what extent do employees differ (by their race/ethnic group) in their perceptions of being discriminated against, treated rudely, hearing insensitive comments, hearing insulting comments, and/or experiencing intra-group pressure, rejection, or exclusion by faculty, staff, administrators, students, and generally on campus because of their race/ethnicity?

Research Methodology

A mixed method research design was employed in this institutional case study. First, three two-hour public hearings were held in the Student Union to provide a central location for all employees. The hearings were publicized via e-mail announcements, flyers distributed around campus, a campus mailing to all employees, and a Blue Line link on the university's Web Site. A total of 31 faculty, academic staff, classified staff, and students provided public testimonies, and six private hearings were conducted. Second, a Personal Reflections on Race and Ethnicity (Critical Incident) On-Line Survey (and a paper version) was made available for seven weeks to all faculty, academic staff, classified staff, and limited term employees (LTE's) at the university. The design of the survey utilized phenomenological inquiry by attempting to understand what positive and negative race and ethnicity-related encounters employees at the university have experienced in the context of their employment. Reflection on such work-related experiences is a means through which employees can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their encounters; an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development. Reflections elicited through critical incidents represent a form of *reflection-on-action*, where one replays an experience in his/her mind to form opinions and judgments of past behavior (Preskill, 1996). Analysis of the survey data was accomplished with the aid of N-Vivo, a software program designed to help organize qualitative data.

Third, a campus survey instrument was mailed to all 3,400 university employees. The instrument was comprised of four sections. Section one was comprised of 20 five-point Likert scale statements that assessed respondents' overall perceptions and attitudes regarding diversity in race and ethnicity at the university. Based upon the Workplace Diversity Survey (De Meuse & Hostager, 2001), five constructs were addressed: organizational outcomes, personal consequences, emotional reactions, judgments, and behavioral reactions. Section two utilized 31 four-point Likert scale statements to assess the frequency of respondents' experiences at the university related to race and ethnicity. The constructs targeted included: rude treatment, discrimination, insensitive comments, and insulting comments (by faculty, staff, administrators,

students, or generally on campus). Other statements addressed the frequency of experiences involving the following: intra-group pressure, harassment, graffiti, university-affiliated events, university publications, and discussions about race and ethnicity. Section three included 15 five-point Likert scale statements to assess respondents' reactions to proposed solutions to race and ethnic-related problems and issues. Section four included six demographic questions. At the end of each section, respondents were invited to provide comments regarding their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward diversity in race and ethnicity at the university. A total of 582 surveys were returned; about a 17% return rate.

Findings: Public and Private Hearings

The following observations were reported in the hearings: a) There is a lack of commitment to recruit and hire people of color in higher level positions. b) There is an over representation of people of color in lower level Program Assistant (i.e., PA-1 and 2) Classified Staff positions, and there is a lack of systematic opportunity for their advancement to higher level positions at the university. c) People of color receive lower salaries within their employment ranks and within their employment categories. d) The campus is generally perceived by potential students as an unwelcoming environment for people of color. 4) Several instances of racial profiling by university police officers were reported, specifically targeting African American males. e) the university's leadership doesn't encourage diversity. f) The university does not provide adequate and sufficient employee development workshops for classified staff. g) People of color are the targets of stereotypes, and their credibility as professionals and colleagues is often questioned. h) Faculty members tend to be insensitive to the diversity needs of students and classified staff of color. i) The curriculum for many programs at the university does not reflect the history and/or contributions of people of color. j) The university's Discriminatory Conduct Policy, University S-47, has been stripped of the Informal Complaint Process. k) The overall climate at the university is cool (and unfriendly) to people of color.

Findings: Personal Reflections Survey

A total of ninety-seven useable responses were reported. These responses were organized into cases. The cases were organized into three macro level themes: those that embraced diversity; neutral responses (or nothing to report); and negative or problematic issues.

Embracing Diversity

About twenty percent of respondents (19 individuals) provided responses that "embraced diversity." They commented on positive personal and working relationships with diverse colleagues, and positive and insightful interactions with students of color. They acknowledged programs that included diverse faculty and staff, and programs that were successful in recruiting and retaining students of color. Illustrative cases included the following: a) European American students showed kindness and respect for an older African American student with a disability; b) A faculty member reported having "fun" working with young African American students; c) A European American felt "accepted" by African American custodial workers as being non-biased; d) A European American faculty member indicated that collaboration on a major grant led to a greater understanding of cultural identity; e) A European American academic staff expressed appreciation for the mentoring provided by a senior African American faculty.

Nothing to Report

Another twenty individuals (or 20.62%) indicated that they had no race or ethnicity related incidents to report. Some statements included the following: “nothing comes to mind,” “never had this happen,” “I have not experienced such an incident at the university,” “nothing has happened to cause me great discomfort. . . .there have been subtle things but nothing comes to mind,” “nothing in particular,” “just the usual smiles and friendliness from the students and faculty,” “nothing I can recall,” “all of my days at the university are great,” and “no event.”

Negative or Problematic Issues

The largest number of respondents (i.e., 58 or 59.79%) reported negative or problematic issues.

Racial Discrimination.

Eighteen (31.03%) respondents reported racial discrimination incidents. These included accusations of the creation of a hostile work environment because of one’s racial background; occupational discrimination; racial profiling, hiring discrimination, differential reporting assignments, racist symbols, and others. Examples of some of the racial discrimination cases submitted included the following specific incidents: a) After an inappropriate interaction with a team leader, an African American woman transferred to a different unit on campus; b) A professor was flip, arrogant, intimidating, and demeaning to African American students; c) A department chair resisted hiring a top-notch African American master’s degree student; e) An “excellent” African American Student Advisor was forced out of position by an Assistant Dean; f) A supervisor verbally harassed an African American staff and routinely mistreats people of color; g) An African American woman’s resignation cited racism in the department.

Derogatory and/or Insensitive Comments.

Fourteen respondents (24.13%) reported derogatory and/or insensitive race/ethnicity related comments. These comments were sometimes uttered in a larger race/ethnic confrontation. These incidents were reported by those who were the targets of the remarks, heard the remarks in a conversation, or overheard the remarks by other employees. Some of the reported incidents included the following cases: 1) A faculty member was told that whites are ineffective advising students of color; 2) Derogatory remarks by an administrative staff were made to a student worker; 3) A frustrated telephone caller blamed the race of the receptionist; 4) A senior faculty advised that African American colleagues/administrators should not to be taken seriously; 5) An out of control African American co-worker used vulgar language to refer to a colleague.

Reverse Discrimination and/or Favoritism.

Ten respondents (17.24%) witnessed “reverse discrimination and/or favoritism.” In these incidents, racial and ethnic minorities were perceived to have been provided special treatment or privileges that were not made available to European Americans. Some of the reported incidents included the following cases: an African American graduate student allegedly falsified records but was not reprimanded; and a European American employee was asked to change his/her racial identity.

Race Card.

Six respondents (10.35%) observed an incident that involved a race/ethnic minority “playing the race card.” Playing the race card is a strategy typically employed by individuals

(and groups) of persons of color to leverage arguments, debates, and resources in intense confrontational situations. Several cases were reported in this investigation in which the respondents perceived that a colleague played the race card. Some of the reported cases included the following: race was attributed as the primary factor in the prioritization of job assignments; a European American faculty was intimidated to report the behavior of disruptive African American custodians; and an older African American student attributed her classroom difficulties to racism.

Lack of Campus Diversity.

Six others (10.35%) indicated that the university campus “lacks significant diversity.”

Rude Behavior.

Four respondents (6.90%) reported “rude behavior,” where individuals perceived that they were treated rudely because of their race/ethnicity.

Findings: Campus Survey of Current Employees

Wide-Spread Attitudinal Support

Wide attitudinal support currently exists for improving the climate for diversity on campus. For example, data from the campus survey found overall positive perceptions with regard to personal consequences, emotional reactions, judgments, and behavioral reactions to race and ethnicity diversity. Several themes and comments (i.e., 96 comments indicating perceptions and attitudes supportive of diversity, and 8 comments describing positive diversity experiences) from the written comments on the campus survey also demonstrated support for diversity. These positive dispositions toward racial and ethnic diversity suggest positive attitudes exist on campus for diversity initiatives.

Employees of Color Experience the Campus Differently

A chi-Square analysis found that the respondents to the Campus Survey differed significantly by race and ethnicity in their perceptions of their employee experiences at the university. Because of their race or ethnicity, people of color were significantly more likely to indicate that they have occasionally or frequently: a) felt discriminated against on campus, b) been treated rudely, c) heard insulting comments by faculty and staff, e) heard insensitive comments on campus, f) witnessed highly offensive or derogatory university affiliated events or materials, and g) had a discussion about race/ethnicity that affected them in a negative manner.

Half of African Americans, and forty percent of Asian Americans and Native Americans, indicated that they had occasionally or frequently experienced *racial discrimination* on campus. From one third to one half of African Americans and from one fifth to forty percent of Native Americans indicated they occasionally or frequently experienced *rude treatment* by faculty, staff, administrators, or students. Over one half of Native Americans indicated they “occasionally” or “frequently” heard *insensitive comments* by students. With the exception of Asian Americans (22.2%), from one third to forty percent of other people of color heard *insensitive comments* occasionally or frequently. From about fifteen percent to nearly half of Native Americans and from one fifth to one third of African Americans indicated they either occasionally or frequently heard *insulting comments* by faculty, staff, administrators, and students. Nearly a quarter of Native Americans, and nearly fifteen percent of Latino Americans and African Americans indicated they had either “occasionally” or “frequently” attended events where minorities were portrayed in a highly offensive (or derogative) manner.

Several of the comments written on the campus survey also indicated a negative climate exists for people of color. Analyzing the data via N-Vivo, a total of 21 themes emerged from the 327 comments that were received from all sources on the Campus Survey instrument. For example, 64 comments expressed perceptions and attitudes skeptical of diversity initiatives; 26 indicated they had witnessed racism, discrimination, or insensitive comments; 42 expressed concerns about the negative consequences of diversity; and 3 discussed defensive coping strategies for a negative campus climate. Overall, the campus survey responses indicated that the climate for race and ethnic diversity can be significantly improved.

Conclusions

First, a campus climate exists at the university that marginalizes people of color, and the university does not have a coherent plan that identifies strategic goals for assisting each campus unit to identify and assess its level of diversification in accordance with a campus plan. Second, race and ethnicity related bias was noted in the discretionary enforcement of the university's rules and policies. The majority of negative cases in the Personal Reflections Survey involved workplace clashes which resulted in accusations of racism or racial bias against managers, supervisors, and professors. Third, the organizational climate of the university fostered communicative patterns dominated by defensive routines that inhibit organizational learning. Fourth, the majority of negative cases in the personal reflections survey were not satisfactorily resolved. The majority of individuals involved in negative cases sought assistance from administrators and supervisors, but the cases were not satisfactorily resolved.

Recommendations

The strategic apex of the university should: a) demonstrate a commitment to effectively managing diversity and offer a leadership training program to support racial ethnic minorities in preparing for leadership positions; b) become a learning organization, i.e., via the creation of a campus-wide advisory committee and an ombudsman position; c) provide for its employees professional development workshops on communicative competence, multicultural leadership, organizational learning, and ethics. All administrators and supervisors should be required to participate in university sponsored leadership training workshops and seminars on interpersonal relationships, leadership, inter-group relations, and group management skills.

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